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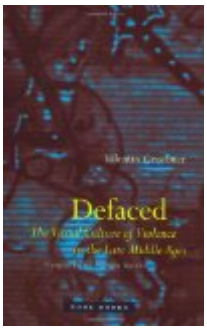
Valentin Groebner. *Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages.* Translated by Pamela Selwyn. New York: Zone, 2008. 218 pp. $22.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-890951-38-2.



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Valentin Groebner observes in the introduction to *Defaced* that he did not set out to write about violence. While researching means of personal identification used in centuries before such techniques as fingerprinting and photography, he repeatedly found instances in which the results of violence made identification difficult.[1] These cases included battlefield corpses and other people rendered faceless by mutilation. As he studied his materials, he also found himself thinking about how we view violence today, starting from a photograph of a "faceless" victim of a terrorist attack in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The disfigurement of the face, in particular, renders an individual *ungestalt*, as in the original German title of the work. A second consideration for Groebner was what he perceived as the rather fast and loose use of abstract images of the body and violence in cultural studies. In this rich but somewhat fragmented study, he proposes instead to ask how images of extreme violence functioned in the late Middle Ages, not as precursors of a later age, but in ways that are more directly comprehensible to us.

Chapter 1 contains theoretical reflections that Groebner suggests may be skipped by readers not interested in them. He discusses the role of violence in more recent times, particularly the disjunction between increasing security against violence in modern societies even as fear of violence seems to escalate. He cites present-day examples of violent images, while also noting how unrestrained violence continues to be associated with the Middle Ages in popular culture. To make the point that violence creates horror and fear in a specific context, he notes that a merchant's hand severed by a knight as a willful act against the city of Nuremberg in 1498 evokes reactions of horror, while the same act carried out as a judicial sentence by the city fathers provokes no such outrage among citizens of the city. His larger goal is to focus on how pictures of violence are directed at viewers in context. They are more specific than symbols in chains of signifiers.

The second chapter begins with a discussion of graffiti in modern cities in comparison with signs on medieval city walls that similarly staked

out territory through use of official insignia, badges, and private signs. He emphasizes the degree to which laws and statutes were kept secret from the general public, with the result that deceptions and dissimulations were easy to carry out. The reading of signs thus became crucial for the survival of people living in late medieval cities, and violence was a very real outcome for those unable to read correctly. Conspirators who donned identifying badges or clothing, known only to co-conspirators, represented a major threat to the established order of the city.

In chapter 3 we read about noses cut off for alleged sexual misconduct, usually adultery, but occasionally also for homosexual acts. Particularly striking are private acts of revenge by cuckolded husbands, acts that seem often to have led to little more than a slap on the wrist, even in those instances when the perpetrators were arrested. Groebner makes the telling observation that no martyrs with severed noses have been recorded, despite all sorts of other mutilations they are supposed to have suffered. The severed nose thus easily becomes a sign of lost honor in general, and this conclusion leads him into a discussion of the different meanings of honor for men (victorious), women (immaculate), and merchants (honest). The examples he uses to illustrate his arguments in this chapter are particularly fascinating, and the data presented are particularly relevant to the defacement adumbrated in the title of the book. One can add the observation that rhinoplasty, plastic surgery to repair mutilated noses, is attested to as early as 500 BCE in India and was also widely known in Europe in the Middle Ages.

Chapter 4 ventures into the gory crucifixes so common north of the Alps in the late Middle Ages that even travelers from Italy commented on them. Violence to Christ's body supposedly enabled believers to feel the pain caused by human sinfulness. But punishments inflicted on criminals could lead to similar representations, and images of the Christ and the Antichrist became difficult to distinguish. The resulting ambiguity of signs made it easy for the public to become fearful. Further evidence of this problem is provided by reports of passion plays and other public spectacles that offered representations of the conflict of good and evil and audience reactions suggesting intense involvement, which even led to violence in some cases.

The last chapter reveals rather gruesome details of reports from battlefields about corpses desecrated by victorious enemies who took trophies such as fingers, heads impaled on spikes, and body fat. This material leads to a discussion of the ways in which clashing armies distinguished friend from foe using banners and colors sewn on uniforms. One can usually see such identifying crosses in visual representations of battles, but the dead on the battlefield, stripped of their clothing, are no longer recognizable as individuals. They have lost their markings. The conventions of marking group membership also open the door to subterfuge, and accusations of Swiss donning the red cross of Austrians and Austrians wearing the white cross of the Swiss in order to mislead the enemy were common. Signs, in other words, can easily be inverted, and atrocities result when duplicity is added to violence.

In the afterword, Groebner returns to his opening arguments. He wants to make the case that the bloody practices of violence he has dissected in the preceding chapters are neither "ahistorical and always present" nor an "archive of alterity" for the use of cultural historians (p. 149). Instead they are specific products of their time that function in ways that are easily recognizable for us in our own societies when we focus on the ways in which violence is described and represented. We find the proper use of violence for self-protection and for upholding the norms of society, while cruel violence is that inflicted by others outside of the realm of legitimacy.

The volume concludes with a postscript, subtitled "shock, horror ... cool topic! What are twen-

ty-first-century historians doing studying violence in the premodern era?" Groebner recounts how violence is suddenly everywhere in the academic world, as measured by conferences, but he expresses uneasiness about the disconnect between cultural studies and the sociological literature on violence. And here he picks up a theme from chapter 1: namely, that the actual threat of violence continues to decline while media hype escalates fear. In reality, most perpetrators of violence reside in the households of their victims. He offers an interesting aside on representations of violence by noting that the Christian tradition in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages emphasized stoic capacity to endure suffering. Beginning in the thirteenth century this mood changed. The expression of feeling, the demonstrative representation of pain, came to dominate, and that remains our preferred mode of representation today. Finally, is "security," seemingly the buzzword of the present, the opposite of violence? Or what might be hidden behind this term?

It should be noted that this fifteen-page postscript, along with its inclusion in the index, differentiates the paperback edition under review here from the hardcover edition published in 2004 and widely reviewed at the time.[2] Curiously, the Web site at Zone Books currently (December 2009) lists both the hardcover edition, dated 2004, and the paperback edition, dated 2008, suggesting that both are still available. But the page count given on the Web site (two hundred) applies only to the 2004 edition, while the statement "with a new postscript by Valentin Groebner" can refer only to the 2008 paperback, a difference nowhere made explicit. This discrepancy could be a pitfall for an unsuspecting library that might order the hardcover edition and receive a copy without the new postscript. One might expect the paperback to be designated as a revised edition that contains some newer information from the author.

Groebner's study was originally published in German as ***Ungestalten: Die visuelle Kultur der Gewalt im Mittelalter*** (2003). The translation by Pamela Selwyn, first published just a year later, is entirely praiseworthy. In this edition, there is is an additional illustration (showing a patient with a mutilated nose from a ***Stern*** ad), one caption is corrected, some footnotes are expanded or corrected, and a very useful index is added. The text itself is also reorganized and somewhat expanded in a number of places. The only way in which the English text is somewhat inferior to that of the German edition is that six figures showing illustrative woodcuts are significantly reduced in size and presented two to a page. In some cases, though, the reproductions in the English edition are superior because of the slightly larger format. On the whole, the English edition can be viewed as a corrected and updated version of the original, again with the proviso that only the paperback version being reviewed here includes the new postscript from the author.

What exactly is ***Defaced*** about? Violence in late medieval central Europe? Certainly. Violence in the twenty-first century? Yes. Methods of historical research? That, too. And much more. Let me attempt a vastly oversimplified summary of this fascinating study: Some remarkably vivid portrayals of violence are preserved from the late Middle Ages, both in images and in texts. To understand them properly, we need to try to comprehend what they meant to the people at whom they were aimed. Our framework for carrying out this analysis is strengthened by thinking about how representations of violence function in our present-day world. We need to avoid two pitfalls: representations of violence are neither ahistorical, nor are they only sources to construct cultural history. Real people created them, just as we do, to arouse empathy, fear, anger, revenge, and other responses, depending on the specific context.

Such a summary hardly does justice to the richness of Groebner's study, and it ignores entirely the specific details he incorporates about violence in late medieval Germany, Switzerland, and

Italy. It is also true, however, that it is sometimes difficult to see what ties together five rather disparate chapters, each with plenty of food for thought. And, as always with historical studies that draw so heavily on close reading of specific images and documents, how representative are the examples? Nonetheless, Groebner knows the material and the era well and has provided stimulating readings of it.

Notes

[1]. See especially ***Who Are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe*** (2007), reviewed on H-Net by Christopher Close for the H-HRE List, September, 2007. URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13577.

[2]. Examples include reviews by Peter Arnade, ***Renaissance Quarterly*** 58 (2005): 259-261; Daniel Baraz, ***American Historical Review*** 110 (2005): 205-206; Jennie Klein, ***Art History*** 28 (2005): 799-802; Robert Mills, ***Speculum*** 80 (2005): 880-881; and Stanley E. Weed, ***Sixteenth-Century Journal*** 36 (2005): 913-914.